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ABSTRACT

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TOWARD A RHETORIC OF GROWTH

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COMMUNICATION AND DEWEY'S ETHICS: TOWARD A RHETORIC OF GROWTH

It would seem safe to assert that our world is presently beset by a bewildering array of difficulties. Through our social and political institutions we are attempting to find ways of dealing, in both domestic and international arenas, with a wide range of problems: war, economic uncertainty, over-population, pollution. Within this context, we seek as individuals to find satisfaction in our relationships with our fellows, and to give direction and meaning to our lives in a rapidly changing environment. We try to secure some control over our own destinies, to acquire some power to direct our own futures, to gain some influence over whom we are each becoming.

These are not aspirations that are unique to our age; but our age is unique inasmuch as we must deal with these aims in the context of a highly complex and fluid environment and with a growing awareness that in some cases time may be running out. We are also unique, moreover, inasmuch as we have at our disposal more tools with which to implement our goals than people of earlier eras have had. Technology; scientific method; economic, human, and natural resources; the agencies of government, commerce, and education--all can be employed to meet the exigencies we confront. But there is an instrument whose use is presupposed in all the others. In order to deal effectively with our problems, in order to utilize our technology, science, and other tools, we must be able to cooperate with one another, to act in concert toward common goals. And in order to cooperate we must communicate.

How simple a thought: "We must communicate." But how tenuous and fragile is the contact between human beings that the idea recommends. The problems with which we are faced require just this contact among people, this sharing, this thinking-in-common, for their solution. This instrument above all others must be employed in responding to the demands of our age; and it must be understood and refined if it is to be employed with effect.

John Dewey's views of communication, I believe, contribute significantly to just such an understanding and refinement. In particular, Dewey's exploration of the ethical dimensions of communication provides a framework within which we can articulate a contemporary rhetoric that is responsive to one of our most fundamental concerns: our own continuing emergence as human beings. What kind of creature are we? What kind of being might we become? What kind of being <u>should</u> we become? These, I submit, are questions that supercede in importance such more particular issues as political order, economic advancement and stability, population control, environmental protection, and energy. For through all the crises, conflicts, resolutions, and reconciliations, there is one constant: the human being. What is at stake in our deliberations over social, political, and economic policy is not merely what sort of world we shall create; it is, finally, what sort of person we shall create.

More immediately for the student of communication, what are the consequences of communicating for the emergence of human character? How can communication be employed to <u>enhance</u> this emergence? These questions themselves lead us to consider, finally, how we <u>ought</u> to communicate with one another, not just to deal with specific immed-

iate and long-term problems, but to help us become the beings we ought to become. It is in dealing with this question that Dewey's writings provide guidance. In this paper I shall attempt to show how by summarizing his views of morality and communication.

Throughout his life John Dewey proclaimed that the principal crisis of our times is the divorce of science and values. He championed the application of scientific method to the entire range of human problems, and he believed that the main task of philosophy in our times is to help bring about a union of science, ethics, and social philosophy. But what does this mean? How are we to apply scientific method to our social and moral problems? Dewey's view of the nature of these problems makes such an application possible.

"Let us grant all that the existentialists have told us," writes Dewey scholar Richard Bernstein, "about the irreducible absurdity of the world in which we live. Still, we cannot escape making decisions and choices. Dewey's entire philosophy is an argument that the method of intelligence is our best resource and guide for living."[1] Dewey considers social and ethical problems to be essentially similar to the empirical problems to which the methods of science are customarily applied. Thus is his moral theory continuous with his general theory of inquiry. As Sidney Hook notes,

> Dewey's hypothesis is that the rationale of scientific method is just as applicable to the field of morals as to the world of nature, and that in any particular situation, by the use of intelligent methods of analysis, one course of conduct can be established as "better" than another.[2]

In his reconstruction of ethics, therefore, Dewey's aim is to show that ethical norms are not fixed, that they are ends that arise

in inquiry and that they can be achieved through the methods of critical analysis, trial, and reflection that characterize experimental science. Following his observance of the primacy of these methods, Dewey's theory of valuation in general, and his ethical doctrine in particular, focus upon the relationship between means and ends--between action and the consequences of action--as the ground of judgment. This concentration upon the means-end relationship in Dewey's instrumentalism has been construed, of course, to mean that any means is acceptable if the end is important enough. Dewey explicitly repudiates this interpretation, and indeed he specifies that the efficiency of action viewed as means is only one criterion for choosing conduct. Another, equally important standard centers upon whether a given course of conduct, if pursued, would give rise to consequences that might conflict with other values.

Dewey's moral theory specifies what among these other values is to be viewed as primary in <u>all</u> practical deliberations: the quality of character to which proposed courses of conduct can give rise. Thus does the <u>self</u> becomes, for Dewey, the focal point in practical deliberation and choice. "The choice at stake," he tells us, "in a moral deliberation or valuation is the worth of this and that kind of character and disposition. . . . Moral deliberation deals not with quantity of value but with quality."[3]

Moral choice is distinguished from the broader process of valuation by its fundamental interest in the nature and development of character. The focus of moral value is what one is and will be. It is, indeed, the evolution of one's own being that is at stake in moral deliberations and judgments. And for Dewey, any conduct that can

influence this evolution has a moral dimension. But if it is the emergence of character that ought to guide our deliberations, at what sort of character should we aim? What determines the worth of "this and that kind of character and disposition?"

When Dewey discusses "character" or "self" he intends the entire complex of dispositions, desires, habits, and meanings that constitute a person's identity. The concept of self comprehends the ways in which an individual characteristically or habitually perceives, thinks about, and acts in the world. It includes his personal ways of classifying, valuing, inquiring, defining, choosing, judging, and behaving. What we must determine, then, is what sorts of habits and dispositions are laudable and to be pursued. What is the ideal self toward which our moral choices should aim in their direction of conduct?

There are for Dewey three principal standards for determining the moral worth of a particular form of character: Freedom, Social Sensitivity, and the Growth of Creative Intelligence. These standards, moreover, are themselves grounded in a broader ethical principle, namely that whatever human characteristics serve to maintain and enhance the lives of individual and community are to be prized. Dewey considers the three factors just mentioned to be primary among such characteristics. Let us look briefly at each of them.

A chief requirement of sound valuation, on Dewey's view, is that judments and choices be made with a view toward maximizing one's options for dealing with future problems and thus for making subsequent valuations. What is essential, therefore, in making such choices, insofar as they can influence the emergence of the self, is that the individual aim at maintaining a maximum of personal flexibility, an

openness to the possibilities that experience may present for continued action and development. What is essential, in other words, is that choices about conduct aim at maintaining freedom for continued growth; that they reinforce the disposition to avoid becoming habitualized or routinized to the point of rigidity; that they encourage an attitude of exploration and a willingness to look for new avenues of development. Thus conceived, personal freedom is one attribute of the moral self, and the degree of freedom fostered is one measure of the morality of an action. As Dewey writes,

> Freedom in its practical and moral sense (whatever is to be said about it in some metaphysical sense) is connected with the possibility of growth, learning and modification of character. . . . As we mature we usually acquire habits that are settled to the point of routine. But unless and until we get completely fossilized, we can break old habits and form new ones. . . . As far as a person becomes a different self or character he develops different desires and choices. Freedom in the practical sense develops when one is aware of this possibility and takes an interest in converting it into a reality. Potentiality of freedom is a native gift or part of our constitution in that we have <u>capacity</u> for growth and for being actively concerned in the process and the direction it takes. Actual or positive freedom is not a native gift or endowment but is acquired. In the degree in which we become aware of the possibilities of development and actively concerned to keep the avenues of growth open, in the degree in which we fight against induration and fixity, and thereby realize the possibilities of recreation of ourselves, we are actually free.[4]

This freedom, this openness to one's experience and capacity for uninhibited deliberation and choice, is an essential condition for continued individual development and expansion. It is, therefore, a primary attribute of the ideal self. We should aim, on this view, at enhancing the development in ourselves and in others of the responsiveness to the possibilities for self-exploration and growth that is a key to self-recreation.

A second dimension of the moral self derives from Dewey's con-

ception of the social nature of personhood. For Dewey, the individual is deeply rooted in and dependent upon the community of which he or she is a member. The person is nurtured by and derives his individual identity from the social process, from the process of intercourse through which he affects and is affected by other selves. "Selfhood is not something," Dewey remarks, "which exists apart from association and intercourse. The relationships which are produced by the fact that interests are formed in this social environment are far more important than are the adjustments of isolated selves."[5]

Because the individual is not separable from the community, because he has no individuality except in the context of community life, he has a fundamental stake in the welfare of the community. His own well-being is bound inextricably to that of the larger entity. The intimate connection of self and community requires that the individual's choices and judgments concerning conduct rest upon a profound sensitivity to the welfare of others. As Dewey tells us, "only that self is good which wants and strives energetically for good consequences; that is, those consequences which promote the well-being of those affected by the act."[6]

Hence, responsiveness in one's practical deliberations and choices to the well-being of others is an additional attribute of the moral self; for the freedom and growth of the individual are fundamentally linked to the freedom and potentiality for growth that exist in the social environment. The individual, therefore, has a vital interest in promoting, through his conduct, the development of social conditions that will conduce toward individual freedom and growth. More particularly, Dewey recognized that each of us has a fundamental

interest in contributing to the growth in others of those attitudes and habits, tendencies and desires, meanings and sensitivities that comprise the moral self. The responsiveness of which he writes is a disposition to attend in one's practical deliberations to the consequences of action for the moral development of others.

There is an additional quality of character implicit in the foregoing discussion, one that brings Dewey's moral theory back to its roots. The two features of moral selfhood examined thus far are, like other ends in Dewey's scheme, instrumental toward some further end. This latter objective is for Dewey the focal point of all moral endeavor; for it concerns what he takes to be the natural aim of human life: the expansion or growth of mind and consciousness, the advancement of creative intelligence. This aim is for Dewey the most inclusive ground for judgments of value and morality. As he writes in the Ethics: "We set up this and that end to be reached, but the end is growth itself."[7]

In what, precisely, does "creative intelligence" consist? In the answer to this question lies the key to Dewey's moral theory and to his entire philosophy. In this, moreover, we find a reaffirmation of the humane values that must ground our own explorations and applications as we seek to develop a rhetoric responsive to the demands of our time. According to Bernstein,

> Intelligence consists of a set of flexible and growing habits that involve sensitivity; the ability to discern the complexities of situations; imagination that is exercised in seeing new possibilities and hypotheses; willingness to learn from experience; fairness and objectivity in judging and evaluating conflicting values and opinions; and the courage to change one's views when it is demanded by the consequences of our actions.[8]

Human intelligence, then, comprehends man's powers of inquiry

and discovery, deliberation and conscious choice, sensitivity and freedom. Note particularly the emphasis on imagination. As a power to plan and to anticipate the consequences of action, intelligence is also a power to see the unseen, to go beyond the obvious and respond to events that are perceived only in the mind. Intelligence includes a capacity to hypothesize, to perceive and manipulate in the mind the possibilities that dwell in experience, to give significance to events.

As such, intelligence includes a responsiveness toward the meanings of events, an ability to discern the complexities and potentialities that inhere in existing conditions. The meanings given to experience constitute for Dewey a major aspect of mind; for they provide the conceptual framework within which future experience is understood. "When an event has meaning," Dewey writes,

> its potential consequences become its integral and funded feature. When the potential consequences are important and repeated, they form the very nature and essence of a thing, its defining, identifying, and distinguishing form. To recognize the thing is to grasp its definition. Thus we become capable of perceiving things instead of merely feeling or having them. To perceive is to acknowledge unattained possibilities; it is to refer the present to consequences, apparition to issue, and thereby to behave in deference to the connections of events. As an attitude, perception or awareness is predictive expectancy, wariness. Since potential consequences also mark the thing itself, and form its nature, the event thus marked becomes an object of contemplation; as meaning, future consequences already belong to the thing.[9]

Implied in Dewey's conception of intellectual growth, therefore, are the expansion of the meanings one gives to experience and the enhancement of one's capacity to apprehend those meanings. Practical deliberation and action, if they are to be morally sound, must aim at finding methods for dealing with problems that will simultaneously diversify and expand the meanings through which actions and events

are understood.

The moral quality of character is determined finally, then, by the becoming of the self, by the direction of growth, rather than by the present condition of character. Virtue resides in the quality of change, not of being. "For everywhere," Dewey concludes,

> there is an opportunity and a need to go beyond what one has been, beyond "himself," if the self is identified with the body of desires, affections, and habits which has been potent in the past. Indeed, we may say that the good person is precisely the one who is most conscious of the alternative, and is the most concerned to find openings for the newly forming or growing self; since no matter how "good" he has been, he becomes "bad" (even though acting upon a relatively high plane of attainment) as soon as he fails to respond to the demand for growth. Any other basis for judging the moral status of the self is conventional. In reality, direction of movement, not the plane of attainment and rest, determines moral quality. [10]

So what are we to make of all this? How might we, as students of communication, build upon this moral perspective? Here Dewey's views concerning communication--and the uses to which it should be put--become relevant. For, as we shall see, communication is the primary instrument through which the growth of self is guided.

The primary features of Dewey's moral self-freedom, social sensitivity, and the quest for intellectual expansion--can best be understood as attitudes or orientations toward experience. They portray a person who is disposed to meet his experience in a particular way, with an outlook that permits--indeed, that invites--exploration and a sense of responsibility for oneself and others. The process of communication enters the moral equation when we consider how such a set of attitudes, dispositions, and outlooks if formed; for, as Dewey conceives it, communication is primarily responsible for how the self emerges. As he observes, "communication is a process of sharing

experience till it becomes a common possession. It modifies the disposition of both the parties who partake in it."[11]

First, communication is an instrument of freedom. If freedom signifies both an awareness of the possibilities for continued growth and an inclination to pursue those possibilities, it is communication with others that creates that awareness and reinforces that inclination. In the act of sharing an experience, whether one is telling or listening, one becomes aware of dimensions in the particular occurence and in experience generally that are disclosed only by its symbolic recreation. "All communication," says Dewey,

> . . . is educative. To be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience. One shares in what another has thought and felt and in so far, meagerly or amply, his own attitude is modified. Nor is the one who communicates left unaffected. Try the experiment of communicating, with fullness and accuracy, some experience to another, . . . and you will find your own attitude toward your experience changing. . . . The experience has to be formulated in order to be communicated. To formulate requires getting outside of it, seeing it as another would see it, considering what points of contact it has with the life of another so that it may be got into such a form that he can appreciate its meaning. Except in dealing with commonplaces and catch phrases one has to assimilate, imaginatively, something of another's experience in order to tell him intelligently of one's own experience. All communication is like art. . . . It enlarges and enlightens experience; it stimulates and enriches imagination; it creates responsibility for accuracy and vividness of statement and thought.[12]

Both in the formulation and expression of a thought, and in the act of participating imaginatively in another's thinking, one is led to encounter alternative ways of seeing things, to view one's own perspective on the world as but one of many possibilities, to realize that there is more to experience than is immediately apparent. Such activities can induce one to question the assumptions, principles, and habits that undergird his world-view, and thence to experiment,

to explore, to try something new. Thus can communication contribute to the liberation of the person.

Besides its effects upon the immediate participants, communication is instrumental in the formation, maintenance, and enhancement of a common life; that is, of a community. Dewey finds no accident in the fact that the terms "community," "communication," and "common" share the same root. All suggest a fundamental sharing or participation in the lives of others, a mutual possession of ideas, interests, values, etc. For Dewey, the existence of a community presupposes and depends upon the sharing of experience that communication generates. "Natural associations are conditions for the existence of a community," he writes, "but a community adds the function of communication in which emotions and ideas are shared as well as joint undertakings engaged in."[13]

Moreover, just as communication is an essential condition of the existence of a community, so is it essential to the formation of an open and free community, one that facilitates the intellectual growth of its members. For through communication, through this participation in the lives of others, we become more aware of just how much there is that binds us together, that unites us. We learn what pleasure there is in discovering another mind, and we learn to treasure one another as we treasure ourselves. "To learn to be human," Dewey says, "is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community. . . ."[14] Through communication with others, our sensitivity and responsiveness to their interests is enhanced because we discover and create common interests.

Finally, communication is fundamental to the growth of individual intelligence. The formation and nurture of mind depends in the most essential way upon one's participation in the ideas, meanings, insights, and ratiocinations of others, a participation whose only vehicle is communication. "Communication," Dewey observes,

> is uniquely instrumental and uniquely final. It is instrumental as liberating us from the otherwise overwhelming pressure of events and enabling us to live in a world of things that have meaning. It is final as a sharing in the objects and arts precious to a community, a sharing whereby meanings are enhanced, deepened and solidified in the sense of communion. . . . When the instrumental and final functions of communication live together in experience, there exists an intelligence which is the method and reward of the common life, and a society worthy to command affection, admiration, and loyalty.[15]

Individual mind is a product of intercourse and association with others. "We know what [the community] communicates to us, and know according to the habits it forms in us," Dewey writes.[16] What we know of the world--the meanings we have derived from our experience --and the ways of knowing we employ--the habits of perception, classification, association, and judgment that comprise intelligence--we gain through communication with others. While we may all be born with the potentiality for intelligence, only in interaction with others is that potentiality actualized.

Most important, it is communication that generates and modifies the meanings in terms of which we interpret our experience. "Meanings," Dewey remarks, "do not come into being without language, and language implies two selves involved in a conjoint or shared undertaking."[17] The sharing between selves, the common possession of experience that communication makes possible, creates and extends meaning: "As to be a tool, or to be used as means for consequences, is to have or to endow with meaning, language, being the tool of tools,

is the cherishing mother of all significance."[18]

Again, then, the act of sharing experience by communicating it creates an opportunity for extending and deepening the meanings that will henceforth be employed by both participants in understanding and responding to events. It is the nature of an experience to have implications that go far beyond what is at first consciously noted in it. Bringing these implications into awareness enhances the meaning of the experience. It extends the significance one perceives in events and actions. "Any experience," Dewey concludes, "however trivial in its first appearance, is capable of assuming an indefinite richness of significance by extending its range of perceived connections. Normal communication with others is the readiest way of effecting this development. . . ."[19]

Communication, then, is the primary agency for developing meanings, for enriching the imagination, for liberating thought and action, and for enhancing the sense of responsibility to others. It is, in sum, the principal agency by which moral growth takes place.

What does this conclusion imply for the practitioner and for the student of human communication? Communication must serve as the principal and essential tool in the liberation and moral development of those who participate in it. On Dewey's view, the future, and thus the self, are always indeterminate. Each emerges as the world presents openings, and as human beings create them, for further expansion or evolution. Opportunities for the continued growth of living things--for their continued evolution--occur primarily in the context of striving to maintain and enhance life; and for humans,

such striving occurs primarily in the context of the social process: in the life we share and create through our attempts to communicate with and influence one another. Primarily through our efforts to share minds while trying to agree upon goals and methods for living together can you and I enlighten and enrich one another and ourselves. For Dewey, such enlightenment and enrichment comprise our primary obligations when we deliberate over and choose conduct. And by extension, such are the primary obligations of those who choose to communicate with one another.

This is the first and most fundamental conclusion implied by Dewey's views: the act of communicating, whatever its particular objectives and constraints, entails <u>in the first instance</u> the obligation to search for and employ means of expression, of explanation, of description, of exhortation, of persuasion, of instruction that will both be effective in dealing with immediate situations <u>and</u> contribute to the growth of the participants. This obligation supercedes all other goals and responsibilities. Whatever else I may seek in my exchanges with you and the others with whom I share thoughts, I must seek above all to create opportunities for exploration of self and other, for increasing our sensitivity to what we have in common, for enrichment of imagination, for the extension of meaning.

What this signifies for the student and for the teacher of communication is, to me, obvious. As students of the process we must seek to understand more completely how it can be employed with moral effect. What methods are there of utilizing signs and symbols that will help realize the ends we are obligated to pursue? What ways of

informing, of proving, of motivating will best enhance moral growth? As teachers of communication, we have a dual responsibility. The first is to focus our students' attention upon such questions as these. We must take care that any exposure to the study of human communication--whether it be in a basic course or in a graduate program--involve in a central way a concentration upon the moral dimensions of the process. Our second responsibility, it seems to me, is to take care that the methods we employ as educators serve the same ends that all communication ought to serve. To be a good educator is not merely to be an effective imparter of information, nor even an efficient enhancer of skills. It is to be, in addition to these things, one who provokes self-exploration and self-questioning; one who inspires curiosity and wonder; one who demands that the student take responsibility for his own communication, for his own learning, for his own emergence. It is to be, ultimately, one who teaches by example what good communication is like. We are, I believe, obligated perhaps more than others to pursue these objectives, and to measure our success and failure by these standards; for we, more than others, are in a position to know what we should be doing when we communicate.

"Of all affairs," Dewey writes,

> communication is the most wonderful. That things should be able to pass from the plane of external pushing and pulling to that of revealing themselves to man, and thereby to themselves; and that the fruit of communication should be participation, sharing, is a wonder by the side of which transubstantiation pales.[20]

It is to such a sense of wonder that we, as students of communication, might finally be led by Dewey's philosophy. It is certainly this

sense that must be central to any inquiry into the subject; for to wonder, it is said, is to begin to understand.

ENDNOTES

1. Richard J. Bernstein, John Dewey (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), p. 177.
2. Sidney Hook, John Dewey: An Intellectual Portrait (New York: John Day, 1939), pp. 128-129.
3. John Dewey and James H. Tufts, Ethics (New York: Holt, 1932), p. 302.
4. Ibid., pp. 339-340.
5. Ibid., p. 331.
6. Ibid., p. 318.
7. Ibid., p. 317.
8. Bernstein, John Dewey, pp. 143-144.
9. John Dewey, Experience and Nature (New York: Dover, 1958), p. 182.
10. Dewey and Tufts, Ethics, pp. 341-342.
11. John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York: Free Press, 1966), p. 9.
12. Ibid., pp. 5-6.
13. John Dewey, Freedom and Culture (New York: Capricorn Press, 1939), p. 159.
14. John Dewey, The Public and Its Problems (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1954), p. 154.
15. Dewey, Experience and Nature, pp. 204-205.
16. John Dewey, Human Nature and Conduct (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 287.
17. Dewey, Experience and Nature, p. 299.
18. Ibid., p. 186.
19. Dewey, Democracy and Education, p. 217.
20. Dewey, Experience and Nature, pp. 166-167.